

Souvenirs from a dream

TOM VERLAINE | 1949–2023

Remembering the **Television** seer's greatest moments, with a little help from some of his many disciples

MARQUEE Moon loomed large over everything Tom Verlaine did in the decades that followed – and, it could be argued, rightly so. Television's epochal 1977 LP is that rare and precious thing: a perfect debut. But it meant that Verlaine's subsequent work, both with Television and on his own, was often overlooked and undervalued. As we mourn the death of a unique songwriter and visionary guitarist, it's a good time to celebrate his entire career, one that is filled with untold gems. "The shadow of *Marquee Moon* is receding," says The Clientele's Alasdair MacLean. "We can forgive that he didn't do the impossible twice and look at Verlaine's other records without that filter. They're all interesting and often magnificent."

"LITTLE JOHNNY JEWEL"

(Ork Records single, 1975)

What a strange thing Television's debut single remains, with spindly guitars, strangled vocals and thudding drums riding a descending bassline into the underground. In the live arena, however, Television would take "Johnny" to ever-ascending heights (see sidebar).

"SEEN NO EVIL"

(*Marquee Moon*, 1977)

A glorious declaration of independence and ambition, with a churning riff and jagged power chords. "What I want, I want now", Verlaine demands at the outset, "and it's a whole lot more than anyhow". On the ecstatic fade, he announces that he intends to "pull down the future" – and you're ready to help him do it.

"VENUS"

(*Marquee Moon*, 1977)

Robert Forster recently called



"Venus" "the most perfect song of all time" – and you'll find no argument here. *Marquee Moon*'s second track is positively sublime, a lucid dream brought to life via deliciously intertwining guitars and lyrics that evoke a nocturnal urban landscape: glowing neon, streets wet with rain, unknown pleasures and dangers lurking around every corner.

"MARQUEE MOON"

(*Marquee Moon*, 1977)

While its 10-minute duration puts it



New adventure: in the UK, 1980, a year after the release of his solo debut

in league with such cosmic counterculture epics as the Dead's "Dark Star" and the Paul Butterfield Blues Band's "East-West", "Marquee Moon" stands alone. It's a beautifully oblique tale, American existentialism pared down to three concise verses: "The kiss of death, the embrace of life". But whatever Verlaine is getting at, it's best expressed by his questing solo, a Mixolydian masterpiece that builds to a delirious climax.

"GLORY"

(*Adventure*, 1978)

Showing off Television's playful side, the first 30 seconds of "Glory" layer hook upon hook to mesmerising effect. The sound of those chiming guitars would prove inescapable in the years to come, as bands like REM, The Feelies and The dB's borrowed heavily from Television to create a new kind of alternative rock.

"DAYS"

(*Adventure*, 1978)

Centred on a hypnotic guitar part conjured from Richard Lloyd's attempt to play The Byrds' "Mr Tambourine Man" riff backwards, "Days" is Television at their pastoral best. Ever the contrarian, Verlaine here rejects the nihilism espoused by his former comrade Richard Hell with a hymn to longevity.

"BREAKIN' IN MY HEART"

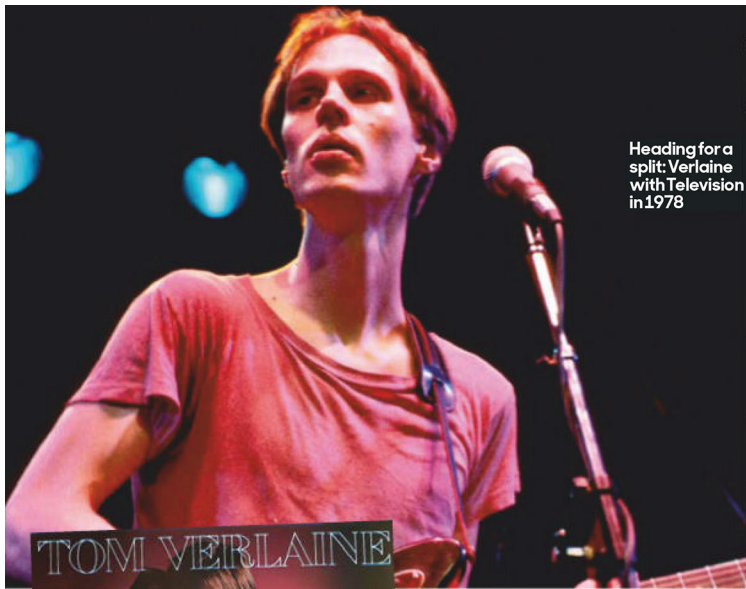
(*Tom Verlaine*, 1979)

"Breakin' In My Heart" dated back to Television's early days (the curious should seek out an awesome 1975 live rendition taped in Cleveland), but Verlaine didn't take the song into the studio until his 1979 solo debut. It's a riotous, "Roadrunner"-esque two-chord wonder, with B-52s guitarist Ricky Wilson egging Tom on to one of his most joyous solos.



Television in 1978: (l-r) Billy Ficca, Richard Lloyd, Tom Verlaine and Fred Smith

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Heading for a split: Verlaine with Television in 1978

TOM VERLAINE



"KINGDOM COME"
(Tom Verlaine, 1979)

With a sunny riff that Lindsey Buckingham would be proud to call his own, "Kingdom Come" is one of Tom Verlaine's high points, a jailhouse lament as powerful as Dylan's "I Shall Be Released". David Bowie knew quality when he heard it, quickly releasing his own rendition on 1980's *Scary Monsters*.

"SOUVENIR FROM A DREAM"
(Tom Verlaine, 1979)

Pounding piano and wiry guitar lines introduce Verlaine's surreal depiction of small-town America – a dream that edges closer to a menacing nightmare as the song progresses: "Thirty lights in a row/ Every one of them green..."

"ALWAYS"
(Dreamtime, 1981)

Verlaine's second album *Dreamtime* is perhaps his most cohesive solo effort – and in some alternate universe, it could've been his breakthrough. "Always" certainly sounds like a hit, with a crunchy, Stones-like groove, a lush chorus and a breakneck finish. Verlaine sings "Love remains the best kept secret in town" – as does this song.

"THERE'S A REASON"
(Dreamtime, 1981)

"'There's A Reason' illustrates why Tom may have felt that he needed to disband such a great combo as Television," says Steve Wynn of The Dream Syndicate. "It creates a wild

world of Tom-upon-Tom-upon-Tom, layering his guitars in a beautiful swirl, like a swarm of bees just set angrily loose from the hive."

"WORDS FROM THE FRONT"
(Words From The Front, 1982)

Verlaine had already visited the battlefield in Television's "Foxhole", and he went back to war for *Words From The Front's* harrowing title track. Over a minor-key dirge, the singer inhabits the persona of a doomed WWI soldier writing home, realising the horrific futility of his position. The tense, mournful instrumental break recalls nothing more than Neil Young's similarly styled "Cortez The Killer".

"DAYS ON THE MOUNTAIN"
(Words From The Front, 1982)

An outlier in the Verlaine catalogue. Driven by a metronomic beat, darkly textured synths (or heavily processed guitars?) and haunted, echo-laden vocals, "Days On The Mountain" highlights the songwriter's uncompromising and adventurous nature. Stretching out to almost nine minutes, it's a hypnotic trip.

"SWIM"
(Cover, 1984)

Starting off with a rambling inner monologue, "Swim" blossoms into one of Verlaine's most gorgeous ballads. His vampiric vocal suggests he isn't taking the endeavour too seriously, but you get the sense he's enjoying himself all the same.

"THE SCIENTIST WRITES A LETTER"
(Flash Light, 1987)

As one of our greatest guitar heroes, Verlaine's six-string prowess received the lion's share of the attention in his obituaries. But he was an exceptional singer, too; unconventional, yes, but absolutely singular. Case in point, you can't imagine anyone else doing justice to

"The Scientist Writes A Letter", a captivating half-spoken, half-sung reverie. Though naturally it does wind down with a terrific solo.

"SPIRITUAL"
(Warm And Cool, 1992)

The all-instrumental *Warm And Cool* offered an eclectic variety of modes, from throwback workouts to unclassifiable jams. Towering above the rest, "Spiritual" is an appropriately celestial five minutes, as Verlaine meditates patiently on the timeworn melody of "She Moved Through The Fair". Don't miss the version with the Kronos Quartet from the *Big Bad Love* soundtrack.

"1880 OR SO"
(Television, 1992)

Television's reunion LP surprised some fans with a more laidback, somewhat groovier version of the band. But it's a worthy addition to the group's slim canon. "1880 Or So", the album's slinky lead track, features Verlaine and Lloyd's serpentine guitars tangling over a driving motorik rhythm. That forward momentum is contrasted nicely by Verlaine, as he happily casts his mind back to simpler times in the lyrics.

"RHYME"
(Television, 1992)

Time seems to stop as the lovely, enigmatic "Rhyme" unspools. It's a hushed performance, somehow both tightly wound and supremely calm, slipstream melodies blending into a steady, minimal rhythm. "Will our vibrations be close?" Verlaine wonders gently as he and the band spiral into a weird dream.

"23 MINUTES IN BRUSSELS"
(Penthouse, 1995)

"It's not a Verlaine composition per se, but Tom's extended guitar solo on Luna's "23 Minutes In Brussels" really tells a story," says that band's Dean Wareham. "It made it a whole different song. He recorded those five minutes of lead guitar in one take."

"THE EARTH IS IN THE SKY"
(Songs And Other Things, 2006)

Aside from sporadic live appearances with and without Television, Verlaine was a rare presence in the 21st century. But his final vocal album, *Songs And Other Things*, suggested that he was far from a spent force. "The Earth Is In The Sky" is a highlight, with a guitar hook reminiscent of Richard Thompson and rapturous visions of wholeness in the verses. **T**

TYLER WILCOX



JEWEL IN THE CROWN

Three Verlaine acolytes heed the clarion call of Television's 1975 debut single "Little Johnny Jewel"



GLENN MERCER, THE FEELIES: "I saw the original lineup of Television at one of their earliest shows and they were very loose, they didn't particularly knock me out. My opinion changed when I heard the "Little Johnny Jewel" 45. It might not be their best song, but the guitar playing really spoke to me. I also loved the intimate sound of the production, with Tom's guitar plugged direct into the tape deck."



STEVE GUNN: "The 'Little Johnny Jewel' mono 45 on Ork is my favourite Tom Verlaine document. I don't usually buy 45s, but I found this a few years ago in London and had to get it. It was funny to find this so late in my deep appreciation of Verlaine, and worth carrying around with me on weeks of travels. Going back to Television's first single all these years later felt like a full-circle appreciation. It's the perfect single, with a fade and flip!"



CHRIS FORSYTH: "The 1978 live version of 'Little Johnny Jewel' on *The Blow Up* is the most incredible 15 minutes of guitar music I have ever heard. I have probably listened to this track more than any other single piece of music in my life."



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